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Preserved for Posterity? Present Bias and the Status of Grindhouse Films in the “Home Cinema” Era

Steve Jones

Despite the closure of virtually all original grindhouse cinemas (Schonherr 126), the twenty-first century is hardly a “post-grindhouse” era. As a concept, “grindhouse” has transcended the American cultural context out of which the term arose. The films once shown in grindhouses continue to find new audiences. US distributors such as Grindhouse Releasing offer uncut, remastered versions of such films as *Pieces* (1982) and *I Drink Your Blood* (1970). Something Weird Video specializes in distributing low-budget films such as *Eve and the Mermaid* (1965) and *Gold Train* (1965) that otherwise would have been forgotten by all but the most avid paracinema aficionados. Since 2005, UK-based distributor Nucleus Films has released four volumes of *Grindhouse Trailer Classics*, and Synapse Films has released six DVD volumes of grindhouse film trailers along with twenty-two compilations of 8mm stag films in its *42nd Street Forever* series. Nostalgia for the grindhouse era is propagated by publications such as Robin Bougie’s *Cinema Sewer* (1997–), documentaries including *American Grindhouse* (2010) and *42nd Street Memories* (2015), and fan Web sites such as 42ndstreetpeteforever.com and Grindhousedatabase.com (both established in the late 2000s). Both David Church’s *Grindhouse Nostalgia* and John Cline and Robert Weiner’s collection *From the Arthouse to the Grindhouse* attest to continuing scholarly interest in grindhouse. “Grindhouse” movies’ formal properties and themes have been emulated in contemporary films, ranging from Tarantino and Rodriguez’s \$53 million double feature *Grindhouse* (2007) to numerous lower-budget direct-to-video (DTV), or direct-to-DVD, neo-grindhouse films such as *She Kills* (2015), *Jessicka Rabid* (2010), and *If a Tree Falls* (2010). These neo-grindhouse filmmakers frequently and overtly appropriate elements from their forebears. For instance, the poster design used to promote *Gutterballs* (2008) is lifted from *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978); the scenes of genuine animal cruelty in *Seed* (2007) are reminiscent of movies such as *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980); and *Chaos* (2005) purloins its plot from *The Last House on the Left* (1972). In sum, “grindhouse” lives on in the cultural imagination, despite the loss of grindhouse theaters.

However, tensions arise out of the transference from 42nd Street’s flea-pit cinemas to the consumption of “grindhouse”—movies, associated paraphernalia, and literature about the era in which grindhouse theaters flourished—in the home (mainly via DVD). If “grindhouse” is to remain meaningful in the twenty-first century (and clearly the term is still employed as a signifier), more needs to be done to account for the digital home-cinema context in which grindhouse is now principally consumed, particularly with regard to the move away from theatrical, analog distribution and the impact that shift has had on the concept of “grindhouseness.”

In some senses, DVD appears to provide a natural home for films that emulate a grindhouse aesthetic, especially those that share the exploitation sensibility that characterized grindhouse exhibition. DTV releasing is associated with “trashy” films that do not fit into the mainstream Hollywood multiplex/blockbuster production model. DTV

is a cultural ghetto, providing distributors such as Shameless Screen Entertainment with an outlet for “fan editions” of niche interest films such as *Almost Human* (1974) and *The Strange Vice of Mrs. Wardh* (1970). Production companies such as The Asylum use DTV to ride on the coattails of mainstream releases such as *Snakes on a Plane* (2006) and *Transformers* (2007) with low-rent imitations such as *Snakes on a Train* (2006) and *Transmorphers* (2007). Micro-budget filmmakers such as Michael Todd Schneider and Ronny Carlsson have taken to self-releasing films on DVD via their own websites (maggotfilms.com and filmbizarroproductions.com, respectively), often in highly limited runs.¹ In these respects, DVD has taken the place of the grindhouse as a home to a shadow film industry, and so it is apt that both grindhouse “classics” and neo-grindhouse pastiches are routinely released DTV.²

However, digital home-cinema technology changes the meanings of “grindhouse” qua concept. “Grindhouse” referred to a location. Since grindhouse cinemas have all but vanished, the term has become increasingly woolly. In its typical usage, “grindhouse” now refers to a conflation of various exhibition practices, audiences, reception behaviors, films, and genres. “Grindhouse” evokes trashy, low-budget exploitation films being shown in run-down, dirty theaters in “bad” (dangerous) neighborhoods, frequented by coarse people who have sordid interests and behave in uncouth, perhaps even criminal ways (see Landis and Clifford 5; Church 80). This stereotypical vision of the unregulated public grindhouse contrasts with the comparatively private, clean, and safe home-viewing context (on the latter, see Klinger 10). Films once shown in grindhouses cannot capture the original atmosphere of the grindhouse context. Furthermore, the films themselves are usually sanitized: digital transference commonly involves removing the grime that corrupts celluloid or restoring prints by reducing signs of damage. The grindhousefilm aesthetic is synonymous with such damage precisely because these trashy films were not carefully preserved. Moreover, since grindhouses operated for long hours and sought to maximize the number of showings that could be gleaned from a single film print, grindhouse exhibition itself caused much celluloid damage. Digital restoration reconstructs original grindhouse films in a way that divorces them from the grindhouse context.

Simultaneously, neo-grindhouse filmmakers use digital technology to emulate analog sensibilities. For example, according to its official website, *The Maniac Project* (2010) was intentionally shot to look “like a 70s/80s exploitation movie” so as to provide “an obvious explanation for it’s [sic] purposeful shoddiness” (Horne). The filmmakers replicate “grindhouseness” in several ways. First, the film opens with advertisements for contrived “coming attractions” such as *Killboots* and *Chair!!!* in order to evoke the experience of sitting through trailers prior to a main feature (a theatrical trend that carried over into video formats). Second, the filmmakers use intertitles to proclaim that *The Maniac Project* was restored from analog sources. The first intertitle asserts that the film is being presented in “what we believe to be the most complete version . . . we have used all source elements available . . . but some materials were damaged beyond rescue.” Later, this forewarning is borne out when it is announced that “unfortunately scene 36 is missing . . . Here is some pornographic imagery instead.” These declarations suggest that the film is composed of analog film reels rather than—as is actually the case—digital files.

These implications are consolidated by the use of digital filters to mimic impairments that befall aged film, including blemishes, dust, and black vertical lines. Exaggerated flickering and color vacillations simulate the natural fluctuations of worn, grainy celluloid. Unfashionable transition effects such as clock wipes and rhomboid irises were added digitally during postproduction in order to accentuate the sense that *The Maniac Project* belongs to a bygone (analog) era. Despite these attempts to replicate analog aesthetics, the film's contemporary origins remain evident; the film is subject to compression artifacts such as macroblocking, for example, underlining that it is a digital product.

Both trends—the digital restoration and the emulation of “grindhouse movies”—underline that twenty-first-century “grindhouse” is distanced from the era that is hearkened to, at least insofar as digital technology has replaced analog technology as an industry standard. In this context of a widening gap between the grindhouse context (the past) and the DVD/home-viewing context (the present), fans and filmmakers have increasingly sought to preserve “grindhouseness.” Paraphernalia is collected, memories are documented for posterity, and films are preserved, canonized, and archived. As with the desire to replicate a grindhouse aesthetic or restore analog films using digital technologies, archiving seeks to reinvigorate the past by accentuating the continued relevance of those objects, documents, and memories to the present. However, the world of the grindhouse is fast slipping away, becoming little more than a blurry set of tall tales and faded phenomenal experiences. The films shown in grindhouses were treated as transient products, rather than being designed for the long-term adoration that characterizes the contemporary cult of grindhouse.³ The prevailing reputation of “grindhouse” as a discourse about the past omits the extent to which commonplace understandings of grindhouse are subject to present bias. The continuing usefulness of “grindhouse” qua concept requires that one should pay greater heed to the contemporary contexts in which grindhouse films are consumed.

“Grate” Atmosphere: Burning Up on Reentry

Most literally, “grindhouse” refers to a location (a cinema), situated within a particular time period and cultural context. Rather than just denoting a specific set of buildings, however, “grindhouse” usually encompasses broader connotations about the city spaces surrounding grindhouse theaters. For example, the mecca of grindhouse, New York City's 42nd Street, is synonymous with porn exhibition, perhaps because the first coin-operated peep machines were installed there (Herzog 31). This longstanding association between sex and the area in which many grindhouses operated is evident in descriptions of grindhouses and the activities reputedly performed therein; for example, Jack Stevenson plainly refers to grindhouses as “meeting places for people interested in having sex, not watching movies” (134). Such pejorative implications about the people who frequented grindhouses and their motives for doing so are an established aspect of “grindhouse” discourse. The connections made between porn and organized crime (Schlosser 158; Jeffreys 71–73), porn and prostitution (Mackinnon and Dworkin 67), or prostitution and 42nd Street (Sagalyn 42–44; Traub 123) contribute toward a more general correlation between grindhouses and crimes such as pickpocketing or vices such as drug use (see Craig 270). Cumulatively,

grindhouses have a reputation for being unregulated “dens of iniquity” (Landis and Clifford 1). These overtones of incivility are apparent in descriptions of the buildings themselves, which frequently focus on bodily excreta, especially sweat or urine (see Stevenson 140; Church 98). Grindhouses are remembered as dirty, grungy locations, characterized by “row after sticky-floored row of crud-flecked seating” (Thrower 20). Associations forged between grindhouses and deviant behaviors bleed over into descriptions of the theaters as damaged environs (see Stevenson 131; Landis and Clifford 3–4). Physical disrepair is taken to signify that the locations were as dejected and disreputable as the people ostensibly inhabiting grindhouses. “Grindhouse” then conflates various contextual elements (regarding people, the buildings, and the surrounding locations), which are imbued with largely negative values.

These values shape the conceptual meaning of “grindhouse,” a term that is more evocative than it is descriptive. The grindhouse experience is not captured by a single object or incident, such as a blocked toilet. Rather, such elements are metonymic signifiers that gesture toward an intangible whole. Attempts to pinpoint the whole are inefficacious. William Lustig’s reference to the “ever-present feeling of danger” and Eddie Muller’s reliance on the cliché that one “felt dirty” entering a grindhouse (both in the documentary *American Grindhouse*) fail to convey the phenomenal experience of “being there.” The same limitation is evident in descriptions that compensate for the abstractness of ambience by laboring over physical responses. For example, Chris Gore declares that grindhouse customers were left feeling “afraid, aroused, grossed out, terrified, disgusted, embarrassed, broken, and stunned into silence,” with the metaphoric result that “bloody pieces [of patrons were left] splattered on the theater walls”; the grindhouse experience was one that “haunt[ed] your dreams and your nightmares” (xi). Gore’s summation includes immediate emotional responses (such as fear), lasting impact (haunting), and location (blood-splattered walls), but the connections between these elements remain mysterious.

However imperfectly, these various descriptions of the grindhouse experience attempt to capture an affective atmosphere. As Ben Anderson posits in his influential work, “atmospheres are the shared ground from which subjective states and their attendant feelings and emotions emerge” (78). Atmospheres have a spatial quality, tying together people, objects, and places by permeating and enveloping them. In Anderson’s conception, the spatial aspect is underscored by the geometric half of the term “*atmosphere*.” The relationship between particular beings, objects, and places is generative: together they produce localized atmospheres (see Ash 24). Atmospheres are in flux since they are contingent on combinations of beings, places, and objects coming together in particular ways under specific sociopolitical conditions. A single object or location does not generate one singular atmosphere at all points in history or in every cultural context. In this regard, Jeffrey Sconce’s proposition that “one can now use DVDs to reconstruct the entire exhibition history of a long defunct Alabama drive-in” (Briggs et al. 49) is insufficient, since such a reconstruction is necessarily limited. Even DVD editions that present the movie with crowd-simulation “theatrical experience” bonus features cannot replicate the experience of attending a live event because the recording cannot capture other sensory information (smells, temperature, and so forth), let alone

atmospheric fluctuations in the crowd's collective mood.⁴

Thus, the grindhouse atmosphere is generated not by a viewer and a film alone, but by multiple elements in combination. These include

1. the film (encompassing the filmmakers' intentions, commercial/industrial pressures, and discourses surrounding the film such as critical reviews, reputation, and so forth);
2. juxtaposed/auxiliary material (trailers, other billed features, lobby posters);
3. the individual viewer (her or his state of mind, temperament, and so forth);
4. other audience members (some of whom may not be watching the film);
5. the immediate interior environment (here, the grindhouse theater, its staff, and its reputation);
6. the broader spatial context surrounding the theater (for example, crime rates in the area);
7. additional environmental factors (for instance, if it is raining outside the theater, the volume of people, smell, humidity, and temperature within the theater are affected); and
8. sociopolitical context (films about untrustworthy authority figures are likely to have generated different atmospheres in the days preceding and immediately following the Watergate scandal, for example).

Accordingly, films shown in grindhouses in the 1970s may be available today, but the grindhouse's reputed atmosphere does not translate into the home environment. Indeed, despite grindhouse theater patrons' tendency to engage in domestic behaviors such as sleeping and eating, grindhouse theaters are more frequently associated with homelessness than homeliness.⁵ In the home context, grindhouse films are divorced from connotations of sleaze, unease, and disease. Indeed, those characteristics never belonged to the films in the first instance. If audience members did engage in untoward behaviors (sex, drugs, theft, and/or interpersonal violence), they did so in spite of the films. That is, such audience members did not necessarily share a cinephile's devotion to the films exhibited. From the contemporary film enthusiast's perspective, the movies are "the point" (especially since grindhouse theaters are no longer accessible), and so the films are saddled with embodying "grindhouseness." That burden becomes heavier as the heyday of grindhouse exhibition drifts further into the past and as detailed information about grindhouse theaters, exhibition patterns, audiences' behavioral rituals, and atmospheric experiences are lost to time.⁶

This distance is amplified by the radical shift in atmosphere signaled by the transition from grindhouse exhibition to home-viewing. Indeed, the two environs are mutually exclusive inasmuch as the popularity of home-video technology precipitated the decline of independent theatrical exhibition (Thrower 20; Nyback 154–55).⁷ "Grindhouse classics" are now mostly consumed by genre fans and specialist collectors on DVD or Blu-ray or via

video streaming. The films are typically viewed by small, specifically invited groups of people who can choose exactly when to watch a particular film; pause and rewind the film; adjust the volume as required; spread a single film out over several sittings; watch in full daylight if desired; and consume the movie in relative comfort and security. The home stereotypically connotes free movement, sanctuary, and autonomy. The home context provides a far greater degree of personal and environmental control because it is a private rather than a public space. The home viewer does not have complete control; a neighbor's dog or exterior traffic may cause unsolicited noise, for instance. However, such infringements are a world apart from the alleged dangers that made the grindhouses ostensibly illicit and therefore exciting places to frequent.

Con[-]form: Analog versus Digital

Broadly speaking, digital shooting, effects, projection, storage, and delivery are now standard in the film industry. Although scholars such as Leo Enticknap have proposed that it is an oversimplification to declare that analog film is dead (64), the transition from analog to digital certainly distinguishes the earlier era of grindhouse exhibition from the present moment. The semblance of a now lost past—the loss of the original exhibition locations—is reified formally: “grindhouse” has become synonymous with a celluloid-based aesthetic. “Grindhouse” films are identifiable by a set of audiovisual tropes such as damaged (faded, bleached, scratched) film stock, missing frames, distorted sound, and so forth. Under the rubric “grindhouse,” these characteristics stand in for a host of broader meanings regarding the cultural status of the films themselves and environmental factors, including grimy theater conditions, the grindhouse clientele's sordid behaviors, and so forth. However, the aesthetic trends associated with grindhouse film do not belong just to films that were shown in grindhouse theaters. Many of these characteristics can be found in contemporaneous non-“grindhouse” films, being contingent on the quality of film stock, special effects technologies, and conventional directorial or editing practices of the period. To limn “grindhouse aesthetics” as the product of an intentional, shared filmmaking vision would be remiss, not least since there was no unified cabal of directors specifically creating “grindhouse films.”

Additionally, the grindhouse aesthetic stems from external, unintentional factors. As mentioned previously, grindhouses exhibited prints on lengthy repeat-rotations. Film reels were often well-worn before they reached grindhouse theaters since these independent cinemas bought studio prints after movies had run their course in major theaters (Heffernan 2–3). The ethos of the period was to treat these prints as disposable commercial products rather than valuable cultural artifacts. However, because grindhouses exhibited tired second or third-run prints and low-budget films made with lesser-quality film stock, the term “grindhouse” became synonymous with an aesthetic of shabby, deteriorated celluloid and “cheapness.” As David Church observes, grindhouses were renowned for “indiscriminately ‘grinding’ through different pictures with little regard for their aesthetic value” (83). Indeed, the films shown in grindhouses were cultural detritus—being either “trashy” cheap films or studio prints that had exceeded their commercial prime—and so were not perceived as items that ought to be handled

with care. Seemingly in compensation for that ill-treatment of the prints, the celluloid flaws that resulted from their cultural rejection have become somewhat fetishized. Heat burns, dust, and splices are battle scars that attest to the history of theatrical exhibition in the period and of grindhouse exhibition in particular.

One might argue that it is important to preserve grindhouse film prints in this state inasmuch as their flaws demonstrate what happens to celluloid under particular exhibition and storage conditions, and therefore these films are significant to those who specialize in “saving and studying the history of the photographic sciences and motion picture technologies” (Ruedel 63). Indeed, Currò observes that scholarly literature on “[d]iscoloration of chemical tints and tones . . . is extremely scarce” (62). The explanation for that dearth is clear: discoloration is perceived as a flaw to be remedied rather than a trait worthy of examination or even preservation. So it is with grindhouse films, which are routinely treated as cultural waste by people outside of a niche fan grouping. Even grindhouse enthusiasts routinely defend these films as artifacts of cultural rather than technical importance. The presumed “worthlessness” of grindhouse films is evinced by the physical defects that constitute a loose grindhouse aesthetic.

Notably, these accidental traits have nothing to do with filmic content or the filmmakers’ intentions, since they are the result of exhibition and storage practices rather than production. As the celluloid has aged, those tropes have become more exaggerated. Furthermore, analog flaws stand out against current standards of high-definition digital video, meaning those traits are more apparent now than they would have been to the makers of grindhouse features or their initial audiences. Since grindhouse’s aesthetic tropes have very little to do with the films alone, the movies cannot signify “grindhouseness” in the way that is now demanded of them. The films are a kind of residual excess, echoes of a past that can no longer be accessed.

That inability to resurrect the past is particularly evident where contemporary filmmakers use digital technologies to emulate the failings of mistreated celluloid. Although blemishes may be faithfully recreated, digital and analog films create different atmospheres. Even if one is unable to consciously perceive them, there are intrinsic formal differences between analog and digital film, as Paolo Cherchi Usai proposes: “in film projection, because of a blade shutter . . . the screen is dark for at least half of the time, meaning that almost half of the movie we are watching is actually made of darkness. This doesn’t happen in digital projection.” Usai concludes that such differences impact on “our senses” and “aesthetic judgment” (60). This kind of difference may be difficult to pinpoint, but it certainly has a significant impact on atmosphere. When neo-grindhouse filmmakers digitally manipulate their footage to evoke imperfections that are unique to celluloid, the resultant images do not affect viewers in the same way a tattered analog print would. The attempt to replicate flaws thus underscores dissimilarities rather than affinities between neo-grindhouse and original grindhouse films.

Neo-grindhouse filmmakers’ attempts to emulate grindhouse aesthetics are limited to reproducing exaggerated stereotypes that suggest immediate access to a lost era. For example, a looped sample of projector noise plays throughout *Survive!* (2009). This extra-diegetic sound mimics one aspect of grindhouse exhibition but simultaneously

underlines the distance between analog projection and the modes of distribution in which the film's production company—Digital Grindhouse Entertainment—specializes. In another case, the 2011 Retromedia Entertainment DVD release of *Shriek of the Sasquatch!* (2011) promises "pseudo-retro drive-in fun, complete with film damage," while reassuring the potential viewer that although the film is set in 1979, it was "[f]ilmed in 2010." The augmented conventional tropes referred to ("film damage") have come to signify "grindhouseness" and so highlight how far removed contemporary audiences are from the creation, exhibition, and distribution contexts that generated the original grindhouse aesthetic.

If neo-grindhouse films capture anything of their antecedents' essence, it is not via their pastiche of celluloid blemishes, but rather via the mismatch between such choices and contemporary mainstream filmmaking standards. In an age when digital technologies are used to color-correct and rejuvenate images for an audience accustomed to HD, it is perverse that neograndhouse filmmakers use digital technologies to emulate the accidental flaws that impaired their predecessors' movies. Neo-grindhouse ostensibly protests that a whole filmic tradition has been lost and that audiences should remain attentive to that past rather than blindly celebrating new technologies as if they are intrinsically better simply because they are novel. Yet neo-grindhouse filmmakers do not valorize grindhouse classics outright, nor do they make an absolute case for the continued relevance of their forebears. Instead, neo-grindhouse filmmakers replace the originals with a hybrid form that overwrites the past while not quite befitting the present. Via their aesthetic choices, neo-grindhouse filmmakers align their digitally shot products with previous grindhouse movies. This strategy is self-effacing, inasmuch as it borrows aesthetic signifiers that attest to the unloved status of the original grindhouse films. In this regard, neo-grindhouse filmmakers flag their own cultural irrelevance in the contemporary commercial sphere. Simultaneously, the approach is self-aggrandizing; grindhouse movies were denigrated in their contemporaneous cultural setting but subsequently became objects of adoration. Neo-grindhouse filmmakers arguably draw on the grindhouse aesthetic to imply that eventually fans will valorize neograndhouse films, even if such films are not immediate commercial successes. The grindhouse aesthetic also aligns neo-grindhouse films with "the ongoing backlash against overproduced, over-budgeted blockbuster films by offering a low-budget alternative to the studio system" (Tryon 43).⁸ That is, neo-grindhouse filmmakers appeal to consumers who are sympathetic to the notion that mainstream cultural tastes are generally conservative and exclusionary.

Neo-grindhouse should thus be understood as a new form even if it mimics the old. Neograndhouse filmmaking is a knowing mode that is beleaguered by a kind of smug superiority. Neo-grindhouse filmmakers and distributors impose their own status and aesthetic rather than having such properties thrust upon them. For instance, in 2014 SGL Entertainment rereleased *Hellweek* (2010) as a "Grindhouse Edition," presumably because the original release of the film failed to find an audience and attracted highly negative reviews (for example, see Conry; Duncan; and Riordan). The "grindhouse" rerelease provided an opportunity to explicitly market what critics saw as inept filmmaking as an intentional, ironic pastiche of a prior era. Despite leaning on the past,

neogrindhouse films nevertheless conform to present filmmaking standards and aesthetics in a general sense. “Grindhouse”-style visual cues cannot mask the unmistakably contemporary look and feel of digital video that lies beneath the superficially imposed “analog” filter effects.

The digital remastering of grindhouse originals for DVD or Blu-ray presents another set of problems. Whereas neo-grindhouse filmmakers use digital technologies to insert flaws, distribution companies have released older films in versions that remove celluloid damage. For example, in 2015 Grindhouse Releasing distributed Lucio Fulci’s *The Beyond* (1981), a “towering achievement in hair-raising, mind-bending cinematic terror,” as a “superdeluxe 3-disc collector’s edition.” As the press release boasted, the edition was a “spectacular high-definition digital transfer of the original UNCENSORED director’s cut” (Barton). The twin emphases on digital restoration and authenticity (“original UNCENSORED”) suggest that the film has been refurbished to its original state—that is, how the film would have looked at the time of its making, prior to its exhibition and storage. Thus, the restoration sought to evacuate the footage of its history (the damage that the source prints and negatives suffered over time). Restoration “de-grindhoused” the film, removing any residual evidence that *The Beyond* was treated as anything other than a “classic.” The process also involved stripping the film of evidence that it existed as celluloid or that it was exhibited and stored at all. By aligning the film with contemporary standards of digital presentation, companies such as Grindhouse Releasing subject films such as *The Beyond* to another form of present bias. The result is a paradox. The distance between an older format (celluloid) and contemporary digital filmmaking collapses when film is digitized. Simultaneously, the distance between analog and digital is underscored because the film has to be restored. The HD transfer replaces the former version (the authentic original), which is destined to become ever less perfect as it ages. The film is preserved,⁹ but only as an emulation of the original analog version, broken down into data.

“Restoration” is problematic then, since it is a euphemism for “replacement” (and displacement). “Restoration” does not return the film to its “box-fresh” state. The HD transfer of *The Beyond* exists in a state beyond Fulci’s intentions and the technological options available to him when he made the film in 1981. Fulci could not have imagined what a high-definition digital transfer of *The Beyond* would have looked like because the technology used to conduct and display the restoration were not available when the movie was shot on 16mm film. The restoration may align *The Beyond* with contemporary viewing standards, but those standards are temporally specific rather than timeless. HD transfers are new products rather than a bridge to some authentic past. The moment of the film’s creation and initial reception cannot be restored.

Gone Too[,] Soon: Contemporary Myth-Making and the Daily Grind

The past has passed and yields to the new. It is easy to be nostalgic about the past once it is “safely, rather than sadly, beyond recall” (Lowenthal 28). Dominant conceptualizations of “grindhouseness” are tinged in precisely this way. Since grindhouses cannot be

experienced as they once were, the concept of “grindhouseness” has to be reconstructed from existing data. As is the case with digitally remastering film from extant materials, some degree of processing is required to align the resultant information with contemporary understanding. Prevailing conceptualizations of “grindhouseness” are typically skewed toward the present and so are diminished by inadequate critical reflection on the ways that historical data has been processed and realigned to fit the present.

For instance, the predominant understanding of grindhouse theaters as run-down audiovisual cesspits is prejudiced by present bias. Such a vision of the grindhouse imagines the theaters toward the end of their functional lives, at moments closest to the present. Yet as with grindhouse film prints that were once fresh and undamaged, grindhouse buildings were not built in a state of disrepair. It is difficult to imagine precisely what a fresh, pre-exhibition print of *Chain Gang Women* (1971) looked like or what it would have been like to sit in the Rialto or the Roxy when these theaters were pristine. If challenged to forsake one’s perception of grindhouses as run-down poverty pits, one might imagine sitting in the rebuilt Rialto Theater in 1935 by drawing on the contemporary frame of reference for cinema-going: the experience of sitting in a multiplex cinema today. There are numerous differences that one would be unable to imagine if one did not experience them originally. Trying to imagine cinemas as locations before they became “grindhouses” is akin to trying to imagine one’s grandparent as a spritely, spotty teenager. For example, I have no precise frame of reference via which to envisage my grandfather in prior, younger states. Photographs and reported reminiscences do not provide enough information to facilitate such a reconstruction. Any such imagining is rooted in my experience of the middle-aged adult I first met.

Those who did experience the grindhouses firsthand are equally subject to present bias. Retrospective tales of the grindhouse are experientially distant. Features are exaggerated or misremembered based on the present conception of “grindhouseness” and its significance. For example, concurring with the notion that grindhouses were jeopardous, accounts of “the grindhouse experience” typically highlight feelings of trepidation: reporters such as Gore describe themselves as voyagers who boldly faced the dangers therein (xi). The grindhouse—by reputation, at least—offered its intrepid explorer the thrill of temporarily sitting among the pimps, prostitutes, drug users, and thieves who allegedly frequented these theaters. However, such descriptions are problematic. Since the reporter attended a grindhouse, clearly the audience was not composed only of untoward individuals. Jancovich and Snelson recognize that grindhouse audiences might have been more diverse than is often accounted for (110), and no census of visitors was taken.

One might go further. First, there is a strong possibility that the *majority* of visitors perceived themselves as outsiders. That is, the average grindhouse visitor is unlikely to have classified himself or herself as a social miscreant, instead foisting that reputation onto the other, unknown patrons who lurked in the theater’s darkness. The notion that grindhouses were dangerous places might be more the product of rumor and discourse than fact. Second, if reports of the grindhouse were written by outsiders—individuals

who did not regularly attend the theaters or who differentiated themselves from supposedly regular attendees—their reports are skewed by assumptions about the staple clientele and their reasons for attending. I have yet to encounter an account of the grindhouse experience told from the perspective of the homeless drunks, sex fiends, or urinating muggers who reputedly constituted the grindhouses' core audience. The scant data available regarding grindhouses is intrinsically biased. Consequently, the prevailing understanding what a grindhouse is has been ascertained from highly limited perspectives.

Consider, for instance, Bill Landis and Michelle Clifford's observation that truants were among the grindhouses' customer base (3). Young truants' recollections would be severely distorted by truancy itself; their engagement with the grindhouse was contextualized as illicit and exciting because their truancy was a forbidden, antiauthoritarian activity. Young truants were predisposed to find the adult context of the grindhouse thrilling and to emphasize other prohibited behaviors such as drug-taking, sex, and crime. These might have been exceptional rather than commonplace activities, although they are likely to be recalled more vividly and with greater interest than humdrum behaviors (eating snacks, staring at the screen, and so forth). The same is true for any grindhouse visitor who considered himself or herself to be a contextual outsider. Tales of the exceptional rather than the mundane enter into discourse since routine behaviors are not worth reporting. Once established as the prevailing understanding of the "grindhouse experience," outsiders would have been even more likely to notice any uncouth behaviors because they were primed to do so and because such activities confirmed their prejudices.

Furthermore, grindhouses have become associated with oppositional taste cultures (see Jancovich and Snelson 117), which connote anti-normative behaviors. Like truants, cultural deviants share a thrill with their co-conspirators: they intentionally flout normative rules and restrictions. Oppositionism can be pleasurable. Reports about the grindhouse have been commonly disseminated by fans who, consciously or otherwise, have sought to maintain an ethos of alterity. That discourse has gone unchallenged because it is fostered by fans rather than individuals who allegedly frequented grindhouses for other reasons (such as dealing drugs). For those who were born after the grindhouse's heyday, the grindhouse experience is alwaysalready ungraspable, available only via others' recollections or fetishized artifacts such as posters, fanzines, or the films themselves. The loss of the original locations and filmic practices of the grindhouse era have meant that the reality of what grindhouses were and firsthand experiences of grindhouse exhibition are "fad[ing] away into myth" (Nyback 169). That is, "grindhouse" is buckling under the weight of imperfect recollections, nostalgic (mis)valuation, and unifying generalizations.

Consequently, "grindhouse" is becoming an increasingly woolly term. "Grindhouse" is routinely employed as if it is a subgenre label, despite encompassing films from various genres and subgenres, such as blaxploitation, mondo, horror, gangster movies, spaghetti Westerns, and kung fu flicks. The broader reputational associations forged between grindhouses and porn theaters (which connote pelvic grinding) further muddy the potential of "grindhouse" as a genre signifier, not least since many films of the era defy

categorization. For instance, midnite movie favorites such as *Liquid Sky* (1982), *Cafe Flesh* (1982), and *Boys in the Sand* (1971) are sexually explicit but are arguably closer to art house sci-fi than porn (on this, see Hawkins 228). It seems arbitrary to distinguish between the genitally explicit rape-themed action film *Thriller: A Cruel Picture* (1973) and the sexually violent content of roughie porn flick *Forced Entry* (1973) based on genre, but lumping the two together on the basis that they were exhibited in geographically proximate theaters is an even more haphazard mode of classification. Matters are exacerbated by the “utterly unpredictable” nature of programming in these theaters (see Stevenson 136). The erratic genre-flouting approach to programming stemmed from the need to find a balance between films that could be bought cheaply and movies that would attract customers.

Under the rubric “grindhouse film,” disparate movies appear to share formal and thematic properties with one another and with the grindhouse setting. People, place, narrative content, and aesthetic are married together to form a prevailing conception of “grindhouseness.” Films made on low budgets offered cheap thrills to “cheap” people, who purchased tickets at a bargain price. The distress exhibited in violent movies was mirrored both by the trepidation ostensibly felt by grindhouse audiences and by the distressed (scratched, stretched) celluloid. Overexposed film stock meant that the footage projected onscreen appositely tallied with the exhibition ethos of showing single films as many times as possible (maximizing “exposure”). Abrasive sound and grimy celluloid were matched by the abrasive moral content (“dirty” acts) displayed in grubby settings to audiences who apparently engaged in filthy, ethically questionable deeds. Missing frames or misplaced reels were paralleled by the films’ meandering, nonsensical plots and the miscreant audience of “lost” souls, vagabonds, and drug-fueled “losers” who ostensibly did not know why they were in attendance. None of these generalizations about the films, the people, or the location are to be taken as statements of fact. Yet the ubiquity of such notions in “grindhouse” discourse demonstrates how ideas are intertwined to create what appears to be a cohesive whole.

That rhetorical knot tightens as these ideas are reiterated. Efforts to archive and preserve films or paraphernalia as signifiers of the “grindhouse experience” only widen the gap between “grindhouse” and grindhouses. Metaphorically speaking, watching a DVD copy of *Death Promise* (1977) in an attempt to have a “grindhouse experience” is akin to standing on earth and receiving the light from a star that died years before: the star may look like it is shining brightly, but the emitting origin has already been extinguished and cannot be preserved. Releasing films in multiple formats (VHS, DVD, Blu-ray, MP4) and numerous versions (collector’s editions, fan edits, uncensored copies, remastered reproductions) fragments the property, making an “original,” “authentic,” or “definitive” version impossible to pinpoint. No amount of collectable original ticket stubs, mint-condition posters, trailers, newspaper clippings, or interviews with aging stars can provide access to the past. Rather, such artifacts ultimately underline how inaccessible that past is.

Thus, rather than nostalgically dwelling on the past, one should more carefully consider what grindhouse films are in the present. To use a suitably grisly analogy, grindhouse films are not like corpses that provide answers via autopsy; they are akin to organs that have been transplanted into new contexts, requiring examination in light of their fresh

life and capacities. An HD transfer of *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (1971) “restored [from] vault materials” does not return the film to “its original glory” as Shameless Screen Entertainment claims on the cover of its 2012 Blu-ray release. The HD transfer is a reinvention, a version of the film as it never previously existed. On the cover of its “fully restored” 2004 DVD release of *Fight for Your Life* (1977), Blue Underground declared that the restoration provides “an all-new look at” the film, and this claim should be taken literally. Rereleases do not make the past live again in present. Rather, rereleases make the past (the films) present by altering their materiality. The atmospheres they generate shift accordingly. Moreover, rereleasing analog films on digital formats or using digital effects to emulate the past (however authentically) reveals little (if anything) about the past, but it does underline present filmmaking practices and normative standards.

None of this is to suggest that “grindhouse” should be abandoned as a conceptual term. Rather, more should be done to reconceptualize “grindhouse” in a way that refers not to the past but to the (past relative to the) present. The term itself remains highly evocative. First, since “to grind” means to erode, “grindhouse” recalls the gradual decline of the grindhouses, leading to their eventual destruction. Second, “grindhouse” evokes the shift from public cinema settings to private domestic viewing in the home (where the “grind” is now “housed”). Third, “grind” denotes friction and so is redolent of the grating, abrasive facets of grindhouse films: their sometimes controversial content and, from a contemporary perspective, their often jarring aesthetics. In fact, the older these films become, the more they diverge from the normative standards, fashions, and filmmaking conventions that characterize contemporary mainstream Hollywood filmmaking. “Grind” also evokes the same connotations as the Latin *frendere*, meaning “to gnash one’s teeth.” “Grindhouse” thereby gestures toward the censorial and critical outrage directed at oppositional film cultures.

Reconceiving “grindhouse” as being more about the present than about the past does not entail neglecting history but rather involves paying greater attention to the ways in which historical knowledge informs views of the present. For instance, Church notes that grindhouses “became increasingly associated with ‘low’ genre films as concerns about class became more prominent during the Depression” (80). Turning to the contemporary context, surging interest in restoring and rereleasing grindhouse “classics” on DVD and the upsurge in neo-grindhouse emulations also clearly tie into a period of economic depression (global economic crisis)—a period in which class divisions have become more visible and concrete. Several concurrent economic shifts primed DVD as the new home for alternative fare. DVD’s market penetration peaked, and the amount of films widely available on the market has also soared (see Bernard 53–61).

This saturation, coupled with increasingly viable HD video-streaming technology and the advent of Blu-ray, has led to DVD becoming a cheap, even “cut-price” medium. Simultaneously, according to the MPAA’s “Theatrical Market Statistics,” multiplex entry fees have become ever more bloated as Hollywood studios have augmented the “event” ethos of cinema (particularly with the surge in non-anaglyph 3D movies). The separation of multiplex from DVD is underlined by the economic connotations of those outlets, which parallels a widening class gap during the same period. In this light, Church’s

observation hints toward a pattern regarding economic prosperity, class, and film culture that is pertinent to the present. I do not have space to dissect these connections in detail here, but I hope that this simple example underlines how grindhouse's history can lead to new questions about present and future film consumption, so long as understandings of "grindhouse" qua concept are not principally focused on archiving or propagating nostalgic views of the past.¹⁰

Notes

1. Some are *extremely* limited: Carlsson's 2010 release of two shorts, *Video Geisteskrank/My Monster*, was limited to a print run of only two copies.
2. On grindhouse as a shadow film industry, see the documentary *Bump 'N Grind* (2007).
3. Indeed, these films were not made to last, and their creators did not expect them to be preserved in the way they have: see Julian Petley in the documentary *The Long Road Back from Hell* (2011); Catriona MacColl in the documentary *Dame of the Dead* (2010); and Celeste Yarnail in the documentary *Machete Maidens Unleashed* (2010).
4. For example, the bonus features on the 2003 Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment edition of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) proclaim to allow the home audience to experience the film "as [they] would in the theatre" by "view[ing] audience reactions and performers in front of the screen."
5. It is frequently suggested that vagrants were among the grindhouse's core clientele, since these cinemas allowed patrons to stay for long periods in a warm, sheltered environment. For example, Landis and Clifford include "homeless people sleeping" in their list of "disenfranchised audience [members who] had nowhere else to go" (3).
6. Indeed, Stevenson (148) describes chaotic exhibition patterns in a manner that occludes the rituals and routines of grindhouse exhibition and audience participation.
7. This comes with a proviso; "rather than seeing the emergence of new viewing technologies as precipitating cinema's obsolescence, home theater technologies should instead be understood as restructuring our experience of film, reconfiguring relations of public and private" (Tryon 41).
8. In this regard, Tarantino and Rodriguez's *Grindhouse* may have inspired or provided a blueprint for subsequent neo-grindhouse filmmakers, but its inflated \$53 million budget means it bears greater affinity to the multiplex blockbuster than it does lowbudget DTV horror.
9. This is not to imply that the digital version will be preserved indefinitely: the data will corrupt over time. However, the corrupted digital version will look entirely dissimilar to the worn analog equivalent. The difference is form-dependent and underscores the difference between the two media.

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